

***Supernatural Enemies.* By Hilda Ellis Davidson and Anna Chaudhri, eds. (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2001. Pp. xiii + 226, ISBN 0-89089-711-5)**

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***Supernatural Enemies***. By Hilda Ellis Davidson and Anna Chaudhri, eds. (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2001. Pp. xiii + 226, ISBN 0-89089-711-5)

More often than not, the “new generation” thinks of its predecessors with a mixture of nostalgia and contempt. Usually, the latter out-weighs the former. This is the case, whether we discuss the Enlightenment, the Victorians, or even today. It is particularly true of so-called supernatural beliefs. We tend to see such beliefs and their associated practices as outmoded or even barbaric. We dismiss the supernatural by poking fun at it in films such as “Ghostbusters” or “The Addams Family.” And yet, when something disastrous appears, whether it be SARS or the Y2K threat, this danger is vested with language similar to that used to describe “ghosties, ghoulies, and things that go bump in the night.” In other words, the threat becomes almost supernatural. Our old instincts have kicked in, and we are no different than the people of seventeenth century Salem.

Hilda Ellis Davidson and Anna Chaudhri’s book *Supernatural Enemies* addresses these ancient fears. They present works by a number of scholars which focus on “supernatural enemies”, i.e., enemies who come from outside the familiar world to wreak havoc on us. Their forms vary according to culture: demons, Davy Jones, Klansmen, etc. They also vary according to time, from the Anti-Christ of medieval literature to the UFOs of the twentieth century and today. The works included in this book look at a number of different cultures, from Ancient Mesopotamia to modern-day Scotland. While Davidson and Chaudhri do not intend for the book to be all-inclusive on this topic, it is diverse not only in cultures as previously mentioned, but also in methods used by the various authors to do their research. There is everything from literature analysis to fieldwork. As a result *Supernatural Enemies* is a fairly comprehensive work.

J.R. Porter’s essay “Supernatural Enemies in Ancient Mesopotamia” examines the role played by demons in the Mesopotamian world-view. The demons were ancient enemies, personifications of the elements, who were often given the form of hybrid creatures or monsters. Porter argues that the reason for this was two-fold: hybrid creatures were horrible to look at because they personified the horror they produced in humans. At the same time, their very existence threatened the natural, perfect order of things, and therefore represented possible destruction.

At the same time, Porter points out, because these demons had animal aspects, they could be harnessed to protect humans from other demons. This was the reason for the statues of hybrid creatures acting as guardians at city, palace, and temple gates in many Mesopotamian cities.

Porter's essay provides very good descriptions of the demonic population of Mesopotamia, and how the Mesopotamians dealt with them. The essay falls short, however, when it attempts to draw links between ancient Mesopotamian beliefs and the later beliefs of Western religion. If there is, in fact, influence of one on the other (as Porter suggests), then he could have focused on this influence more. As the essay stands, Porter merely mentions ties between god-demon struggles and the battles between heaven and hell, but one gets the impression that this and other ties are merely tossed in to make the essay more interesting to the reader.

A more thorough work is Jennifer Westwood's essay "Friend or Foe? Norfolk traditions of Shuck". In this work, Westwood researches her childhood bogey: the Black Dog known as Shuck. She discovers that the Shuck legend has many different variations, depending on the source. To some, he is a phantom dog; to others, an omen of impending death; to others still, a guardian. Westwood also discovers how the Shuck legend has been standardized by previous folklorists to the point where it has become a stereotype. She argues that certain aspects of the Shuck legend have been over-emphasized, namely being an omen of death, while his role as a source of terror has been diminished. Westwood also examines other famous Black Dogs of English folklore, including the Black Dog of Bungay, who dates back to the Elizabethan period. The Black Dog of Bungay strongly resembles Shuck, as does another famous (albeit fictitious) dog, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "Hound of the Baskervilles".

Westwood's essay is very effective in drawing links between older material and modern beliefs. Her not-so-subtle criticism of the fieldwork done by previous scholars is also noteworthy. It should, in fact, act as a warning to all those who work in folklore — let the story tell itself, rather than embellish it. Westwood is quick to point out the discrepancies in such texts, and to suggest how such errors have affected the preservation of the story.

Where Westwood's essay falls short is in its discussion of the Shuck legend in recent times. While she does mention that Shuck and the

Norfolk Black Puma are now considered contemporary (and current) terrors, Westwood does not provide a description of Shuck that is more recent than the early 1980s. Having such a description would have been very useful, as it would have closed the loop on the story.

*Supernatural Enemies* provides the reader with an (at times bewildering) array of terrors. Aside from this, the authors use their topics to address larger issues, whether they be ties between the ancient and post-modern worlds, or the importance of schoolyard stories as folklore.

What is surprising about this book is its limited geography. It seems to reflect an Old World bias. The majority of essays deal with Western Europe. While Eurasia is represented, as are India and Japan, there is nothing about Africa, Oceania, or the Americas, except in passing. This may simply reflect the editors' backgrounds, given that Davidson's area is Northern Europe, and Chaudhri's specialty is Ossetia. Nevertheless, it is hard to see why the New and Third Worlds were neglected. Perhaps a future edition of the book could correct this.

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***Popped Culture: A Social History of Popcorn in America.*** By Andrew F. Smith. (Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001 (University of North Carolina Press, 1999). Pp. xxi + 264, ISBN 1-56098-921-1)

It's easy to imagine a general book about popcorn being not very good. But despite the corny pun in its title, *Popped Culture* is a good book. It has what you would want if you were teaching a course on the evolution of popular foods, their vernacular preparations and their meanings. It has a good index, a very full and useful bibliography, and excellent attention to its sources in the form of real reference notes. And it has many pages (fifty!) of small-font, well-documented, historical recipes for popcorn.

This is not a supermarket book. Andrew Smith, its author, teaches food history at the Open School University in New York and has written previous books on the history of tomatoes and on ketchup. It is a scholarly book that happens to come on the recent great wave of popcorn popularity.